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## **“Seed Bags and Storytelling: Modes of Living and Writing After the End in Wanuri Kahiu’s *Pumzi*”**

“Living in a time of planetary catastrophe thus begins with a practice at once  
humble and difficult: noticing the world around us.”

(Anna Tsing et. al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* 7).

*Pumzi* is a short film directed by Kenyan film maker Wanuri Kahiu, and first screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010. Set in a post-apocalyptic nuclear desert-scape, where water has disappeared, the film opens “35 years after World War III –“The Water War”” with an areal shot of a compound – “the Maitu Community, East African Territory” and the surrounding desert. The story follows the main character Asha, played by Mostwana actress Kudzani Moswela. In the film, Asha works in the natural history museum of the Maitu Compound, and upon being sent an anonymous package containing a soil sample which tests high for water content and low for radiation levels, she escapes the Compound in search for the source of the soil. Asha steals the Maitu or “mother” seed, a museum relic of the time before nature had died, in the hopes of planting it in the source of this seemingly healthy soil. Before escaping, however, we are shown the no-waste, recycling economy of the Compound itself, as well as the key relationship Asha forms in order to effect her eventual escape.

In what follows, I want to argue for the ways in which the film might help us to think about how climate change, environmental apocalypse and narrative relate to one another. To put it quite simply, how do we ‘write’ the apocalypse. Perhaps even more importantly, how do ways of imagining after the end tell us something about our selves as a species and our relationship to narrative. In some ways, I am following the interrogation of Srivas Aravamudan, who asks, “If nuclear holocaust could eliminate not just lives but life-forms, what literary genres are adequate for

representing such permanent annihilation?”<sup>1</sup> But I want to push the potential of this question beyond structural notions of genre, in order to ask a more fundamental question. Which is, in what ways does the possibility of potential species death – witnessed by the sixth great extinction event of the planet we are currently living through – force us to rethink some very basic ideas about our relationship to narrative itself? I want to think about how climate change and environmental apocalypse occasion an interrogation of some basic notion of how we tell stories; stories both of ourselves as humans, and our relationship to other non-humans, as well as to the earth itself. Put simply, it is not only a matter of how to represent the eventual environmental collapse of the earth, but rather how this collapse causes us to rethink some of our assumptions about representation broadly and narrative making in particular. What stories we tell, and how we tell them, might just have something to do with how we live in and through this moment of planetary precarity.

In terms of how to represent both a dying planet and a dying species, one of the questions that I want to raise is what does a reckoning with climate change – whether we call this the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene<sup>2</sup>, or any other of the proliferating terms for our current moment – what does this reckoning offer us in terms of different narrative structures, different ways of telling and carrying stories, and thus different ways of being in and potentially surviving this moment. Ian Baucom and Matthew Omelsky have made a similar argument in a recent special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* focusing on climate change and knowledge production. They write that their aim is to “chart some of the ways in which climate change discourses have reshaped the contemporary architecture of knowledge itself, reconstituting intellectual disciplines and artistic practices, redrawing and dissolving boundaries, but also reframing how knowledge is represented and

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<sup>1</sup> Srivasan Aravamudan, “The Catachronism of Climate Change,” *Diacritics* 41.3 (2013), pp. 6-30, 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Françoise Vergès, “Racial Capitalocene: Is the Anthropocene Racial?” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds. (London: Verso, 2017).

disseminated.”<sup>3</sup> I want to argue that *Pumzi*, through tropes of seeds and sowing, breaks an apocalyptic narrative temporality, and offers us a story whose purpose is to continue the telling of the story. This sounds simple enough, but I will suggest that what the film offers is an eco-ethics based in forms of intimacy and relation that resist neoliberal valuation; a politics outside of the individualism and isolationism of survival as such, and grounded (literally in this case) instead in the co-creational, or sympoietic intimacies of rehabilitation, re-habitation, and narrative making.

Moreover, I want to suggest that thinking together two different genealogies of thought, Indigenous climate change studies and Afrofuturism, might alert us to how much black speculative cultural production, such as *Pumzi*, thinks about the potential futures and pasts of environmental and climate precarity. Indigenous climate change scholar Kyle Whyte notes that, “Indigenous scholars discuss climate vulnerability as an intensification or intensified episode of colonialism.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the environmental precarity we are currently witnessing on a planetary scale has been an integral part of the relationship of Indigenous peoples to their local environments as a result of colonialism. In many ways this is nothing new. Environmental precarity and even potential collapse have been, from the beginning, a defining experience of colonization. To put it another way, Indigenous peoples – and I would add, formerly-colonized as well – the world over have been living their environmental apocalypse. How is this apocalypse imagined? What futures are able to be thought under the sign of continued, or ongoing, earth catastrophe?

In his seminal article, in which he coins the term “Afrofutursim”, Mark Dery writes that, “The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Baucom and Matthew Omelsky “Knowledge in an Age of Climate Change,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116.1 January 2017 (1-18) 2.

<sup>4</sup> Kyle Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene” *English Language Notes* 55.1-2, Fall 2017 (153-162) 153.

for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”<sup>5</sup> Though he is talking more specifically about an African-American community, what Dery points to is precisely the historical importance of future-thinking, or rather the importance of historical narratives for thinking about the future of formerly enslaved and formerly colonized peoples. Frantz Fanon addresses the function of the past when he writes that “colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.”<sup>6</sup> So, if current climate precarity is not a new phenomenon, but rather an intensification of the extant models of colonialism, then imaginative modes for thinking about life on a damaged planet can equally be seen to be historical. Moreover, creative responses to the future of planetary precarity, as is the case with *Pumzi*, as well as a host of other examples, are routed through a particular recourse to history and to historical narratives. What we see in much speculative fiction is a return to foundational myths, legends, and narratives deeply embedded in the histories of local communities, in order to imagine the futures of planetary change. Reading *Pumzi* as an example of this kind of return to the future, I argue that the narrative modes based on these ‘returns’ are important for thinking about how we live and tell the story of lives on the planet now and in the future.

In her recent book, *Staying with the Trouble*, author of multispecies and cyborg manifestos Donna Haraway writes that it is imperative to remember the importance of “rehabilitation (making livable again) and sustainability amid the porous tissues and open edges of damaged but still ongoing living worlds, like the planet earth and its denizens in current times being called the Anthropocene.”<sup>7</sup> Through a contrasting of logics in the film, between the Maitu Compound and the possibilities of

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture*, ed. Mark Dery, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 210.

<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 33.

the world outside the Compound, *Pumzi* suggests to us that survival and rehabilitation are not the same thing. If rehabilitation is ‘to make livable again’, in the sense of one’s space and surroundings, then it is also to make *alive* again, and to make *a life* again. On the other hand, the Compound that Asha escapes from ‘sustains’ life, but it is not *alive*, in the sense that it is not rehabilitated, it does not allow *for* a life. Nor is it invested in the (re-)vivification or maintenance of any other ecosystem other than its own. Indeed, based on the hostile reaction of “the Council” to Asha’s request for an exit visa from the compound – in order to search for the source of the mysterious soil sample and plant the (Maitu) mother Seed – the sustainability of the compound is actually threatened by the thought of reforming life outside of itself. Its life-sustaining system is a decidedly closed circuit, an endless feedback of self-contained loops. In this way, the Compound is a cyclical and circular, autopoietic form of ecology. It is a life world built in the image of a “Bounded [or neoliberal] individualism;”<sup>8</sup> a zero sum calculus of excretion and ingestion, whose ethics of naked sustainability are fueled by the engines of neoliberal responsibility. The irony here being that it could be argued that it is this same global, ideological and economic model of neoliberal individualism that is responsible for the kind of post-apocalyptic dystopia we see in *Pumzi*.<sup>9</sup> In other words, while (mere) survival is an individual act, an endlessly closed autonomous circuit of maintaining basic and perhaps even base life, rehabilitation and re-habitation are radically communal and mutual possibilities; possibilities based in the logics of what Haraway calls “sympoiesis.”

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<sup>8</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 5. Haraway writes, “I expand the argument that bounded individualism [what I read as neoliberal ideology] in its many flavors in science, politics, and philosophy has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or any other way.” (*Staying* 5).

<sup>9</sup> Hence some of the other terms which attempt to grasp the role of capital (and its contemporary ideological engine, neoliberalism) in the planetary juncture of crisis we find ourselves: “Capitalocene”; “Plantationocene”, etc. See, for instance Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” in *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 159-165.

Sympoiesis, Haraway tells us, “is a simple word; it means ‘making with.’”<sup>10</sup> This indeed sounds simple enough, but I will argue that it has implications for both how we tell stories in/of the Anthropocene, as well as for the ways these stories reflect on how we exist in the world, and what our modes of *‘worlding’* mean for whether or not we survive *in* the world. The Maitu Compound, we come to see in the film, exists in an otherwise dystopian nuclear desert in what we are told is “The East African Territory.” The Compound itself continues to exist because of the harvesting of the energy of its inhabitants. Asha and the other members of the compound are encouraged to “be your own power generator...100% self-sustainable.” Each resident of this community is compelled – forced even – to generate power for the Compound through work on exercise machines. We watch as a barcode embedded in Asha’s arm is scanned, allowing her entry into this gym space. Based on the scan, she is given an allotted amount of water in order to proceed with her power generation. Ostensibly the scan is also a means of corporeal control exercised by the Council of the Compound over its inhabitants, monitoring who has done the work of power generation. A microcosm of neo-liberal ideological praxis, the Compound is an eco-regime based on the rationing of water and the production of energy. Everyone must produce energy for the Compound, but they labor under the idea, ceaselessly sounding through the intercoms: “be your own power generator,” that they do this labor for themselves.

The small amount of water Asha is allotted by the guard who scans her implanted barcode is meant to sustain her just long enough to do two things: work on the exercise machines in order to produce power; and through this exercise to generate sweat, and urine, which are then ingeniously converted back into potable water through forward osmosis machines located in the toilettes of the Compound. Through the work of each inhabitant, work they are told they are doing for themselves,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 58.

the Compound harvests power. The excess produced through this process, literally the sweat and excretion, is then reinvested into the bodies of these workers, thereby allowing them to go back to the power generating machines. And thus these worker-residents are kept, possibly just barely, from dehydrating. And the lights of the Compound stay on. Everyone must do their part it seems, but everyone's part seems only to re/create the conditions for the survival of every (single) one. Inhabitants of the Compound appear in the film as individual silos of recycled power; ingestion and excretion; endless, self-contained loops of autopoietic production.

The Maitu Compound then is based on logics of bare survival, where sustainability is paramount, but not rehabilitation. These logics are also invested exclusively in the maintenance of the Compound itself; in the continuation of its economies of waste and recycling, and to a lesser extent in the bare existence of its inhabitants. Anything outside these economies is not able to be acknowledged. Indeed, the Compound is hostile to the idea of life outside of its own forms of (re-)production. When Asha places the anonymous soil sample on a scanner, it is registered as an unauthorized procedure and she is told that she will meet with the Council, who appear in a hologram form on a screen in front of her. Asha communicates to the three women who make up the Council that she "has found the perfect soil sample, and planted the Maitu seed. It's growing." Asha continues: "I would like to apply to the Council for an exit visa. This could mean there's life on the outside." A member of the Council counters Asha, saying "That's impossible. You should have cleared it with security. Get rid of it." As Asha pleads that "If I could find the original soil..." she is cut off by the Council leader: "The outside is dead!" "But the soil is alive," Asha contends. The head Council member denies the exit visa, and yet Asha persists, "But I know it's alive. I know it is. It has to be. Look." As Asha places her hand on the scanner containing the soil sample and the scanner passes over both, a digital image of a broad tree blooming in the desert appears before the council. In the image Asha is seen smiling in front of the tree, and then submerged beneath water. The



Council is seemingly given a glimpse into Asha's subconscious, and the earlier dream she had when she first encountered the soil. A dream which the neurological monitors of the Compound detected and ordered Asha to take her "dream suppressants." The investment in the internal economies of the Compound mean that not only is the geographical outside denied viability or life-creating potential, but in a form of oppressive control, which Matthew Omelsky refers to as the film's "neuropolitics,"<sup>11</sup> the subconscious seems an equally threatening landscape outside the sovereignty of this regime of survival. The political economy of the Compound (and hence its sovereignty) exists solely under the sign of bare maintenance – anything that might hold the potential to revivify, not simply recycle, is perceived as a threat. What the Council represents – and consequently where I believe forms of African, post-crisis science fiction such as *Pumzi* to be opening the most productive fields of exploration – is an instance of control over Tsing's idea of the "arts of living on a damaged planet." The eco-regime, represented by the Council in the film, exercises its control over the memorialization – and hence the narrative – of human's interaction with their planet.

The cut in the scene, from the techno-scape of Asha's lab where she scans the soil and interacts with a screen which seems to interface her thoughts, to the plunge she takes into a watery underworld when she inhales the scent of the soil opens the film to a thinking on how the speculative fiction and the mythical come together under the ecological sign of a creation myth, and do so in order to imagine an environmental future. The transition from the natural history lab to the under water consciousness of Asha might suggest a reading of her in this moment as a Mami Wata figure, and specifically in relation to a space of scientific modernity. But I want to suggest that the flashing image of the tree is crucial here for the way in which it offers a foundational creation myth

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<sup>11</sup> Mathew Omlesky, "After the End Times: Postcrisis African Science Fiction," *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 1.1 March 2014, 33 – 49.

as relational to and entangled with the technological dystopia of an ecologically destroyed planet in the film.

The *figus sycamorous* tree is central to Gikuyu mythology, indeed the very name Gikuyu is derived from the tree – *mikoyo* – that the deity Mogai figured as central to the creation of the people and their relationship to the earth. Jomo Kenyatta writes that, “in the beginning of things, when mankind started to populate the earth, the man Gikuyu...was called by the Mogai...and standing atop Mount Kenya pointed out to the Gikuyu a spot full of fig trees...”<sup>12</sup> It is here that the foundations of life for the Gikuyu start: in the image of a tree rising up out of the landscape. Asha’s quest, which is to find the source of the potentially-regenerative soil and plant the Maitu – or mother seed – leads her out beyond the Compound’s regime of survival and into the nuclear desert surrounding it. Throughout the film, Asha’s quest is punctuated by her vision of the tree, suggesting to her where to plant the seed and potentially rehabilitate a destroyed earth. But this mythopoietic allusion also offers another narrative mode for thinking through the possibilities of planetary change. A mode based in and on communal forms of storytelling; indeed, a story about the creation of community in the first place. In this way, *Pumzi* is an example how narrative and world-making practices are engaged in response to a damaged earth. It is also an example of how the climate change of the Anthropocene is apprehended through historical narratives embedded in local cultures, which point towards long-established ideas of world-making and storytelling. The future of planetary precarity is routed in this film through the creation myth of the Gikuyu peoples, offering a different conception of life on and in the earth as collective modes of being that might offer ways of surviving this crisis.

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<sup>12</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 3.

I want to focus here on this idea of creativity broadly, and narrative production more specifically, and what these “arts” can tell us about how we live on the planet, but also how our “damaged planet”, as Tsing calls it, also asks us to rethink approaches to telling stories about ourselves. A question about how planetary change and cultural production are entangled informs our reading of *Pumzi*, especially for how the film figures planetary rehabilitation, and re-habitation, as a forms of narrative making. To return to the opening scene of the film, an aerial shot establishes a visual connection between the apocalyptic desert-scape of the outside world and some of the epistemological and ideological foundations inside the Compound. Telescoping in from the dystopian present of the outside world, the film’s perspective enters the Natural History Museum of the Compound. The camera surveys a collection of artefacts which visually chart a historical past that was looking towards this post-apocalyptic future. Newspapers describing how “The Planet is Changing” and “A Whole Day’s Walk in Search of Water”, as well as skeletons and preserved carcasses of animals who ostensibly died as part of this changing planet, make up the material of this Natural History Museum.

Amongst this detritus of the Anthropocene, we are shown the Maitu Seed which Asha eventually steals, and escapes the Compound with in order to plant it in the world outside. The film pauses to show us the etymology of the Kikuyu compound “Maitu,” meaning “Mother. Origin: Kikuyu Language from “MAA (Truth) and ITU (Ours) OUR TRUTH.” The seed itself is symbolic of narrative production, communal truths and shared histories. Asha takes the seed, a symbolic encapsulation of human narrative, from the Compound’s natural history museum and carries this ‘narrative’ (“our truth”) out beyond the cyclical logics of the Compound. Asha’s journey directly from the wreckage of the natural history museum, beyond the boundaries of the compound and through the seemingly-endless desert-scape outside in order to plant the Mother seed, in its determination to start a biological world over, is also an attempt to replant a certain narrative on the

earth, as well as a narrative of *life on the earth*. It is a desperate attempt to survive in the world, as opposed to simply on it; even if this kind of survival means an almost certain death. This mode of survival is outside, indeed anathema, to the blind and repetitive logics represented by the Compound.

But before she escapes, Asha has a brief but important encounter with another woman who works in the toilette of the Compound. This interaction is a pivotal moment in the narrative, as well as in the film's imagining of the stakes of narrative in relation to a dystopian earth. It is an act of kindness and intimacy – even biological and chemical intimacy – between Asha and the attendant upon which Asha's eventual escape and planting of the Maitu seed hinges. The scene comes as we are being shown the technologies of (re-)production which sustain the Compound as well as its inhabitants from which it extracts energy. After completing her circuit on the power generating machines, Asha enters the toilet area in order to collect and recycle her own sweat and urine, and purify it into potable water. As this production and reproduction system is made clear, we see that life in the Compound is a series of radically individuated moments of self-recycling and, indeed, recycling of the self. Asha interrupts this economy by offering a portion of her purified water (again, the osmosed result of her own urine and sweat) to the attendant working in the toilette. Asha's gift of her bodily fluid in this moment breaks the economy of the Compound, the purified water being intended to return to her own body to sustain her for another round of energy production. But the sharing also short circuits both the biological and thus ideological foundations of the Compound.

If each individual living in the Compound is kept alive through their own excretion then each human being represents a closed biological circuit, an autonomous loop of biological sovereignty. This is the only instance in the film of a horizontal sharing across individuals, because it is otherwise anathema to the chemical economy of the space. Asha's gift of purified water, the result of her exertion, refuses a surplus (re-)investment back into her own body, and instead offers it

across to another body, breaking a delicate and intricately controlled biological balance. In doing so, Asha also steps outside of the ideological economies of the Compound, offering a gift that exceeds the boundaries of this regime of individualization. Production in the Compound, the condition for being able to produce (energy for the Compound) is based, again, in chemical processes which sustain individual life, or life *as* individuals. Each member of the compound is an engine of sweat and bodily fluid, their own ecosystem of autopoietic production. Asha's gift of her bodily fluid creates a mutual ecological connection with the toilette attendant. An act of biological intimacy, where the economies and alchemies of mutual production abound, and which precipitates Asha's eventual escape, as well as the eventual planting of the Maitu seed. The circuit is broken by this radical act of gift giving; an intimate, visceral offering, which short circuits the zero sum logics of the Community. Asha's gift is returned in the form of the attendant's aide in Asha's escape, as well as securing the Maitu seed and Asha's compass. The replanting of the seed, the possibility of reestablishing life, and re-habitation of the planet, are seen here as the direct result of intimate biological sharing.

The moment of exchange of confidences and bodily fluids, not only circumvents the autopoietic economies of the Compound itself, but it also highlights an alternative mode of mutual or "sympoietic" production, which culminates in the sowing of the Maitu seed – itself a metaphor for narrative making. The film's attention to these two different modes of production – the individualistic (autopoietic, or self-making) and the mutual, or sympoietic, signals a shift in both the type and function of narratives suited to our current moment of ecological precarity. I want to think with this moment in the film in order to suggest that *what kind* of stories we continue to tell in this moment matters; as well as *how* we create and carry these narratives with us. Shifting our imaginations from tales driven by the triumphs of the individual, to those that capture a spirit of making together is an important step in the direction of picturing differently our future as a species

on this planet. Cultivating sympoietic narrative imaginaries, part of what Anna Tsing refers to as an “arts for living on a damaged planet,”<sup>13</sup> *Pumzi* asks us to think of narrative making in times of precarity not as the story of the individual: neither about the individual, nor produced by a single person. Rather, through a reorientation towards mutual, sympoietic creation in the form of an origin myth centred around a live-giving tree, the film offers us a version of Haraway’s claim that, “Symphthonic [beings and beginnings based in mutuality] stories are not the tales of heroes; they are the tales of the ongoing.”<sup>14</sup>

Once escaped into the nuclear desert outside the Compound, Asha must try and find the geographical coordinates attached to the healthy soil sample she received at the film’s beginning. Because of the returned kindness of the attendant, Asha has escaped with a compass, a small bottle of water, and the now-sprouting Maitu seed kept at her waist in a small pouch. She will carry this small bag, and the bag will house the seed until she comes to the end of her journey, whether through sheer exhaustion or because she thinks she has reached the coordinates, or both. Asha carries the seed, and with it the symbolic narrative of a community, and perhaps even of our species on the planet (Maitu, “Our Truth”). It is a narrative that because of the mutual sharing of these two women carries the possibility of being retold one day. The final scene of the film offers us a different story, a different mode for telling stories, and, indeed, different practices of carrying our stories with us so that there might be more stories as well as more carriers of them. In a piece titled “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin writes about two different narrative modes that have defined the human species. The first is the “Hero tale”, the story of the hunter, who, Le Guin tells us, took his spear and left the group, only to return with meat, the

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt, eds. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 76.

wonders, and the wiles of how he conquered the beast.<sup>15</sup> Le Guin associates certain symbolic objects and activities with the Hero tale: long, sharp tools, for spearing, hooking, clubbing, and killing. The hero is the hero for his ability to wield these objects whether it be to kill the beast or repulse (and kill) the enemy. And the group is constituted *as a group* for its relation to the Hero; they are part of and thus tell his story, the endlessly repeated, looped story of killing. But the hero story, the dominant mode of story telling for perhaps the whole of the Western tradition, is also grounded in a narrative teleological structure, one based on endings; when the hero kills the beast, vests the enemy. The eschatological structure of the hero tale, has conditioned us to want the narrative closure of an end, a death, a finale of climactic proportions.

The other narrative way of being in the world Le Guin describes is the gathering mode, figured by the one who walks through the fields gathering corn or wild oats. Rather than a stick or spear or club, this story teller carries a sack, a bag, a sling, something to collect and carry home oats or potatoes from the field. One can of course see the ideological significance to not only the juxtaposed objects – the bag and the spear – but also to the differing sets of activities associated with these implements, collecting versus killing. Le Guin also claims that these activities imply ways of being in the world; that the hero story moves in a historical line from a hominid's ascent to a hero through the killing of a woolly mammoth, to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. These are tales of incursion and conquest, and almost invariably end in death, giving the hero tale a certain teleology, a timeline that ends in "The End" (whether it be in individual life or collective, species life). On the other hand, the carrier bag narrative is based on ways of being in the world that are invested in keeping the story going; walking out into the field day after day. This is a narrative mode that tells the story of continuing on. But this kind of story is not the popular one; not the one we tell

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<sup>15</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1989).

ourselves as collectives. If we need the hero narrative to see ourselves as a triumphant species, what we also get are both its life practices, as well as its apocalyptic teleologies. Le Guin writes that “It sometimes seems that that story [the hero, killer story] is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we’d better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one’s finished.”<sup>16</sup> If the hero tale is more suited to *climactic* endings, the carrier bag story attempts to keep telling stories in a time of potential *climatic* endings.

*Pumzi* makes clear that power, and the ability to respond to it, has little to do with conventional notions of strength, economic, anthropogenic, or otherwise. Rather, the power the film alerts us to is the ability of both worlding and ongoing; even, or perhaps especially, at the great sacrifice of the individual. *Pumzi* is an example of how narrative and world-making practices are engaged in response to a damaged earth. In the final scene of the film, as Asha plants the Maitu seed in the desert and lays down to die over it, we realize that she will inoculate the seed. She will offer her body as moisture and nutrient in order that the seed might grow, and thus tell the stories of those who have reaped and sowed it. In other words, the story of Asha – both her narrative of struggle to escape the logics of the Council and Compound and plant the seed, but also her actual chemical, cellular story of being – will live on if the seed takes root. Moreover, in the process of gifting and seed-carrying Asha has demonstrated the potential of Le Guin’s carrier bag orientation to the narratives of the earth, and what this orientation might mean for carrying on upon this evermore precarious planet. Asha’s carrying of the seed (“our truth”) offers another mode of carrying and telling stories on/about a damaged planet. This shift in narrative mode, towards sympoiesis and carrying on, is also a shift in how we relate both to a changed earth, but also to one another as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 152.



creatures living in variously damaged places on the planet. It is also a gesture to how we choose to *relate* these relations, or how we tell the story of the current state of planet and the beings on it.

I argue that we need stories such as the one embodied by Asha's intimacies and seed-carrying; stories which highlight the relational nature of our entangled and imbricated human experience; stories which are about co-habitation and which are co-produced. In order to live "...on a vulnerable planet that is not yet murdered," Haraway tells us, "We need not just reseed, but also re-inoculating with all the fermenting, fomenting, and nutrient-fixing *associates* that seeds need to thrive."<sup>17</sup> In other words, it will not be enough to simply plant new seeds. Seeds take life; teeming life that only comes through biological, chemical relations, ecological intimacies and 'becomings together', or sympoiesis. These kinds of alchemies require a fundamentally expanded view of what it means to create, or to make new ecosystems. The seed that Asha replants in the desert soil beyond the Compound is at once the sum of all its many associations and migrations. For instance, the seed as a sign for storytelling differently in an age of environmental crisis, symbolically captures the sweat and urine turned potable water donated by Asha to the bathroom attendant, which in turn provides the sustaining energy (and goodwill) to effect Asha's escape with the seed itself.

We should not forget the film's emphasis on the naming of the seed, as well as highlighting the etymological break down of the word "Maitu." The seed represents not a single narrative, or rather not a narrative told from a single perspective. Rather it is, as we see, "our truth." In other words, there is the mutual making, and re-planting, of a communal narrative. A new world, or even the remaking and the "re-inoculating" of the planet, the film suggests, requires not only the breaking of intra-human boundaries and the creation of bio-intimacies, but also the sympoietic production of stories, of narratives of confluence about how 'we' got here. This is the mode of storytelling that

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<sup>17</sup> Haraway, *Staying*, 17; emphasis added.

*Pumzi* opens up in an age of environmental crisis and possible planet-death. Ideas of authorship, subjectivity and individual sovereignty seem decidedly un-important. What matters is less the story of survival (the story of the Compound), and more the story of rehabilitation; Asha's story, or is it the seed's, the story of "our truth" (read the human species' truth), the story of ongoing.

I want to conclude by arguing that this mode of storytelling and 'story-keeping' in Kahiu's *Pumzi* articulates what Françoise Vergès names the "politics of the possible."<sup>18</sup> These politics of the future open up spaces for rethinking modes of production in the present, modes not based in the colonialist and anthropocentric logics of exploitation and extraction. But these future-politics also index another imaginary. "The politics of the possible," Vergès writes, "also rest on the imagination – on the freedom to dream other pasts and imagine other futures than those suggested by the racial Capitalocene."<sup>19</sup> This imaginary, by offering a temporal mode outside of racialized capital – the dominant system of modernity, and producer of the current state of environmental precarity – suggests another earth-time, a different historical, and thus also future, orientation to the earth. Imagining outside the racial Capitalocene, precipitates not only other modes of production, as well as temporal shifts, but these shifts have to do with different modes of storytelling. How we tell and carry stories as humans of the Anthropocene, will determine how (and perhaps, indeed, if) we continue to survive this latest epoch of the earth. Rethinking our narrative modes implies changing our relations, our ways of being and being with others, humans and other-than-humans alike.

The suggestion goes something like this: if we think differently about not only what stories we chose to tell about ourselves as a species, but also what those stories imbue and celebrate, even how we produce these narratives in the first place, then these imaginings might offer us other possible ways of being and surviving. To return to Haraway's advice, she tells us that, "It is time to

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<sup>18</sup> Françoise Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene: Is the Anthropocene Racial" in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

turn to sympoietic worldings, to vital models crafted in SF [speculative fabulation, science fiction, string figures, etc.] patterns..., where ordinary stories, ordinary becoming ‘involved in each other’s lives,’ propose ways to stay with the trouble in order to nurture well-being on a damaged planet.”<sup>20</sup> Sympoietic worldings and symchthonic stories not only focus on different elements and actions (not on the hero’s deeds, which usually involved killing or conquering), but they also highlight a different temporal mode, one which is not about ending (again killing and conquering) but in its collaborative, sympoietic production offers us a narrative mode of ethics for living on, for the “ongoing.”

It is also worth pointing out here the implications for thinking about gender relations in times of planetary precarity and, perhaps more to our purposes here, to the relation of gender to storytelling modes in the age of the Anthropocene. It is important that the scene of intimacy between Asha and the bathroom attendant is a biological/chemical relation between two women. And as we have seen, this corporeal connection stands in direct ideological opposition to the functioning of the Compound itself. Moreover, the seed Asha carries, the seed that she literally becomes part of at the film’s end, contributing her body to its ongoing, this seed is called the “Maitu” or mother (a translation from the literal: “our” “truth”). So to follow the logic of storytelling figured by these interactions in the film, it matters not only what stories we tell in times of earthly precarity, but it also matters how we tell them, and perhaps most importantly the methods of their making. As the editors of *Arts for Living on a Damaged Planet* write: “Some kinds of stories help up notice; others get in our way.” “Male scientists,” they go on to say, “tend only to cite men...while women scientists tend to cite male and female scientists equally. Unless we learn to listen broadly, we may miss the biggest story of life on earth: symbiogenesis, the co-making of living things. Practices of storytelling matter.”<sup>21</sup> At the risk of over-generalizing, Tsing and others suggest

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<sup>20</sup> Haraway, *Staying*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Tsing, et. al., 8

that sympoietic modes of story-making and story-telling, such as the ones we see figured by the female connections of the film *Pumzi*, are narrative modes of observing the world in necessarily more inclusive ways, ways more attuned to the collaborations, cohabitations and co-existences that make up life on the planet. Moreover, Asha's visions of the tree in the desert, as well as her quest to plant the seed, figure her as Mumbi, or a mother-creator figure central to Gikuyu mythology, routing the film's vision of planetary climate futures through local indigenous narratives of human relations to the earth. As Kyle Whyte notes, imagining climate change from the perspective of indigenous societies means "reflect[ing] the memories and knowledges that arise from Indigenous peoples' living heritage as societies with stories, lessons, and long histories of having to be well-organized to adapt to seasonal and inter-annual environmental changes."<sup>22</sup> I would expand this to say that a film like *Pumzi* demonstrates how the cultural archives of formerly colonized peoples are returned to, reworked, and ultimately respond to the pressing futures of planetary climate change. In other words, myth and legend are seen to be effective narrative modes for thinking differently than the storylines of neo-liberal modernity currently playing out as planetary climate catastrophes. The difference, I argue, is in their communal, sympoietic registers of ways of making together and thus offering different modes of existing together, and not as bounded individuals.

These modes of mutual narrative production not only imagine different ways of noticing and telling us about our world, but, crucially for our times, open the possibilities for imaging a different world completely. A world based in forms of relation, rather than individuation. Sympoeisis then, or collaborative world-making, or world-imagining, is like an aesthetic or imaginative terraforming produced with and between others, whether they be human, plant, animal or mineral. By telling us a story that is about how we carry stories (on us, with us, and even *in* us), *Pumzi* highlights how this

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<sup>22</sup> Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies," 153.

sympoietic mode of being and story-ing is crucial for beginning the necessary step of first imagining how we might continue to live on this damaged planet. I want to end by saying that *Pumzi* represents of a new kind of post-apocalyptic, postcolonial narrative mode, which offer us, as Haraway says, “stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, or the worlding.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Haraway, *Staying*, 119.